



# Lost in transition? Emerging forms of residential architecture in Kathmandu



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## ABSTRACT

Kathmandu has been the last few cities in the world which retained its medieval urban culture up until twentieth century. Various Hindu and Buddhist religious practises shaped the arrangement of houses, roads and urban spaces giving the city a distinctive physical form, character and a unique oriental nativeness. In recent decades, the urban culture of the city has been changing with the forces of urbanization and globalization and the demand for new buildings and spaces. New residential design is increasingly dominated by distinctive patterns of Western suburban ideal comprising detached or semi-detached homes and high rise tower blocks. This architectural iconoclasm can be construed as a rather crude response to the indigenous spaces and builtform. The paper attempts to dismantle the current tension between traditional and contemporary 'culture' (and hence society) and housing (or builtform) in Kathmandu by engaging in a discussion that cuts across space, time and meaning of building. The paper concludes that residential architecture in Kathmandu today stands disoriented and lost in the transition.

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## 1. Introduction

Kathmandu has been one of the last few cities in the world which retained its medieval urban culture up until twentieth century (Aranha, 1991; Levy, 1992; Tiwari, 2001a, Gutschow and Kreutzmann, 2013). Various Hindu and Buddhist religious practises shaped the arrangement of houses, temples, stupas and urban spaces giving the city a distinctive physical form, character and a unique oriental nativeness. Unlike many medieval European cities Kathmandu didn't have an industrial past. Its urban history therefore did not follow Mumford's (1938) three technologically determined eras – the medieval city ("eotechnic age"), the industrial city ("paleotechnic age"), and the future ("biotechnic age"), or "post-industrial" city – that he used to define Western cities. Local historians such as Mahesh Chandra Regmi mark the year 1786 as the beginning of the 'modern era' in Nepal when Prithvi Narayan Shah (the first King of Unified Nepal) established Kathmandu as the capital.<sup>1</sup> Regmi approached modernity through the historical analysis of chronological periods of various lengths and history of Royal dynasties that ruled Nepal. With unification the country saw a new form of political and economic governance but their ramifications rarely penetrated the society's

rich and illustrious culture for the next 200 years. People continued to work as farmers, artists and craftsmen; and kept their ties with the traditional occupations. The city was physically isolated due to high altitude and surrounding mountains. It remained politically and culturally insulated from both European and Persian sovereignties by resisting Muslim invasion in the 15th century and Colonial subjugation in the 18th century.<sup>2</sup> Kathmandu retained its purity and timeless character almost as a frozen city that didn't move, grow or change with time. It thus remained seemingly irresistible to Western scholars who admired the mystic, deep, religious and cultural roots of the city. Much earlier, William Kirkpatrick during his visit in 1793 described Kathmandu valley saying 'there are nearly as many temples as houses and as many idols as inhabitants' (Kirkpatrick, 1811, p. 150). According to his estimate, the city had about five thousand houses (Ibid: p. 150). Levy (1992), referring to Bhaktapur, an indigenous historic settlement, called it a *mesocosm* – an essential middle world situated between the individual microcosm and wider universe. Over the years, the clustered historic settlements in Kathmandu with a living urban culture have become a pilgrimage sites for scholars in architecture, planning and history (Gutschow and Kreutzmann, 2013)

The pursuit of modernity in Nepal effectively began with the redevelopment of the entire southern quarters of Juddha Sadak, a prominent street leading to the historic Durbar Square in Kathmandu, as part of the

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<sup>1</sup> The state of Nepal came into existence in the 18th century when Prithvi Narayan Shah, a king from a small state of Gorkha, fought several battles to combine small feudatory states into one, including the Kathmandu Valley which was previously divided into three small kingdoms under the Malla rulers (11th–18th centuries). Prithvi Narayan Shah established Kathmandu as the capital of Nepal.

<sup>2</sup> There have been many attempts of British invasion in Nepal and tales of braveries of Nepalese soldiers. The first attempt was the battle at Nalapani in 1814–16, followed by fierce attack in Jaithak. Both met with stubborn resistance eventually forcing British commanders to retreat (see, Northey and Morris, 1928)

**Table 1**  
Nepalese residential architectural styles through history i.

Type of homes	Period	Attributes
Early Nepali home	Pre-medieval era (300 AD–879 AD); Licchavi dynasty	Use of stones, decorative motifs showing influences from Samath and Mathura Schools of Gupta architecture in India
Newari home	Medieval era (1200 AD–1769 AD); Malla dynasty	Houses of brick and tile, wit-pitched or pen-roof and enclosed wooden balconies of open carved work; bricks as the main structural material and richly carved woodwork; Tibeto-Burmese influence
Shah home	1769 AD–1846 AD Shah dynasty	Continuation of Malla architecture with influence from Mughal architecture in India
Rana home	Rana period (1846 AD–1951 AD)	Neo-classical, Baroque or industrial style with columns of different orders; French windows and white plaster; a style much in use in Europe and in neighbouring India by the British
Modern Nepali home	1951 AD onwards	Town houses, row housing, apartments; use of concrete and bricks, influence of globalization and westernization

rebuilding in the aftermath of 1934 earthquake. In 1955, Tribhuvan International Airport was inaugurated, opening Kathmandu to the outside world. Simultaneously, the first city plan was prepared in 1969 and Nepal Telecommunication office established in 1975, all of which would further develop in the following decades and become trademark of modernity. Simply put, modernity signifies progress and development implying something different from the language of 'medieval'. The short history of Kathmandu's modernisation suggests that the city did not quite follow Mumford's three phases of civilization. It rather moved directly from eotechnic to biotechnic era. Much has changed in the last few decades with the city's buildings and spaces going through a rapid change within a compressed timeframe. A confluence of multiple social, economic and cultural forces appear to influence this transition.

The changing urban landscape of the city today is attributed to the material conditions of the 20th century with urbanization and globalization emphasizing a 'modern culture' in architecture and lifestyle. High profile palaces and monuments (such as the former palaces Singha Durbār and Narayan Hiti Durbar, Durbar High School, Trichandra College, Clock Tower and numerous courthouses) built under the influence of neoclassical architecture during the Rana rule in the last century herald a departure from traditional architecture, which manifests in its extreme form in the new residential architecture. This trend, accelerated by the shift from owner-built housing to developer-built housing has led to the creation of new forms, identity, and aesthetics. New residential design is dominated by distinctive patterns of Western suburban ideal comprising pastiche of detached or semi-detached homes and high-rise tower blocks. This architectural iconoclasm can be construed as a rather crude, if not cataclysmic response to the indigenous spaces and builtform. Traditionally, private houses were organized around a residential square where people from the extended families resided. Often the votive miniature temple, large water spouts or a well-enhanced aesthetics of the space provided local residents with the opportunity to interact and socialize. The embedded nature of public and private spaces was unique to Nepalese society that accommodated the age old socio-cultural and religious practises. Today, the characteristic feature of this transformation — a sense of rupture and discontinuity — is not only limiting opportunities for social interactions but also eroding traditional housing forms and spatial system. In the historic core, traditional buildings are replaced by incongruous tall buildings with little emphasis on artistic taste (Gutschow and Kreutzmann, 2013; Shrestha, 1981). Elsewhere, the 'free standing' houses erected on subdivided plots of the former palace compounds were branded as 'visual crime'. (Gutschow and Kreutzmann, 2013). Moreover, the recent devastating earthquake of 25 April 2015, which flattened over 600,000 buildings and killed over 8000 people, further placed the appropriateness of the new residential architecture at the forefront of discussion.

The paper attempts to dismantle the current tension between traditional and contemporary 'culture' (and hence society) and housing (or builtform) in Kathmandu by engaging in a discussion that cuts across space, time and meaning of building. In a deeply traditional city such as Kathmandu, architecture as Mand (2013) contends, has been the primary conduit through which tradition and modern binary is articulated. Kathmandu extols the ingenuity generated by its traditional

architecture and has inspired scholars to delve deeper into introspective exploration of its traditions, cultures and nuances to explain the advent of modernity and continuity of change. Our approach is therefore as consonant with those of Gutschow and Kreutzmann (2013), Shrestha (1981), Tiwari (2001b), Shrestha (2010), and Levy (1992). All of whom are interested in finding roots of emerging architectural forms in Kathmandu in order to establish its identity, place in history and embodied urban change (or lack thereof).

The next section discusses the organization of space and house types in the traditional and contemporary Kathmandu to illustrate some of the many paradoxes that confront the notion of traditional vs. modernity in architecture. This will be followed by a discussion on shifting boundaries, social identities and the new modernity questioning their ramification in the creation of a modern city. The paper concludes that residential architecture in Kathmandu today stands disoriented and lost in the transition.

## 2. Distinct identity to unsettling modernity

The variegated history of the traditional architecture and builtform of Kathmandu dates back to roughly 2000 years owing to various kings and dynasties (such as Licchavis, Mallas, Ranas and Shahs lately) contributing to city planning. Early history suggests a distinct progression and design in different periods due to the city's transitional location between India and Tibet/China and cultural influence from both sides (Table 1). Building and artistic activities, particularly from the Malla rule of the 15th and 16th centuries — regarded as one of the glorious periods — gave Nepalese architecture and builtform a strong identity. The effects of mutual rivalry of the city kings, artistic development and competitive mercantile economy on the cultural transformation reflected in the city's layout, art and architecture. Royal Palaces and Squares assumed the highest importance as administrative, bureaucratic and religious spaces. These were also multi-functional spaces implying an extended involvement of 'Royal' institutions in the society. Whilst the traditional Royal towns exhibit an organic growth over centuries, scholars (Tiwari, 2008; Müller, 1981) argue that they are certainly not unplanned settlements despite absence of wide roads, a common trait of planned settlements. The immediate areas surrounding the Palaces were occupied by the elites, the people from the higher castes.<sup>3</sup> The lower castes lived outside the city walls. Different parts of the city, especially district (*Tol*) were often noted for their socio-economic characteristics due to the predominance of one caste-based stratification such as *Nay Tol*, *Pore Tol* and *Brahmu Tol* manifested in the spatial structure of the city (Shrestha, 1981). These references also imply that the importance of the district — *Tol* declined with distance from the city centre (Wright, 1877).

The art and architecture that prospered in the three city states<sup>4</sup> in Kathmandu suggest their rulers' passionate involvement in building temples, monuments and public spaces, in art, astronomy and mysticism, all of which would be deeply etched in the lifestyle of the people.

<sup>3</sup> Class hierarchy is the stratification of the society largely based on the traditional occupations of the people in the Kathmandu valley.

<sup>4</sup> Kathmandu valley had three kingdoms, Kathmandu, Bhaktapur and Lalitpur (Patan).

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